

HABS
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Davidson County Courthouse and Public Building
Public Square
Nashville
Davidson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-168

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

Name: Davidson County Courthouse and Public Building

Location: Public Square
Bounded by Union Street, Third Avenue North, and James Robertson Parkway.
Faces Union Street.
Nashville, Davidson County, Tennessee

Present Owner: Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County

Present Occupant: Metropolitan Government

Present Use: Seat of Metropolitan Government, with office of the mayor, council chamber, county courts, municipal courts, office of tax assessor, register of deeds, and clerks' offices for these departments

Significance: Four courthouses have been built on this site, which was set aside in the original plan of Nashville for a public square and public building. The present building brought about a union of municipal and county offices in one building, approximately twenty-five years before consolidation of the two governments. The building was a significant P.W.A. project. The Courthouse is an excellent example of "Governmental" Art Deco: the symbolism and classical columns speak of a public building, but much decorative work is Art Deco. The Courthouse is also significant because of the excellent craftsmanship it contains--the bronze castings, terra cotta, and carvings, for example.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. The building was constructed during 1936 and 1937. Cornerstone was laid on August 10, 1936. The building was officially opened with a ceremony on December 8, 1937.
Sources: Nashville Tennessean, Aug. 10, 1936, December 8, 1937
Minutes of City Council, Book 24, Pages 116-118
2. Architects: Emmons H. Woolwine of Nashville, Frederic C. Hiron of New York.
A competition was held in 1935, and the winners were announced in local newspapers. Signed plans exist. A present Nashville architect, John Clark, came to Nashville from Hiron's office to supervise work.

drawn by Dean Cornwell

Frederic Charles Hiron: born in Birmingham, England, 1882; graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1903; student at Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris, 1904-09; founder of Beaux Arts Institute of Design; president, Beaux Arts Society of Architects, 1937-39; honorary professor of architecture at Yale and Columbia; died in New York, 1941.

Emmons H. Woolwine: born in Nashville, 1889; graduated from University of the South; student, University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture; studied at Ecole des Beaux Arts; died 1951.

3. General contractors: J.A.Jones Construction Company
4. Plans: Contact Office of State Architect, James K. Polk Office Building, Nashville, Tennessee.
Photographs: Office of the Metropolitan Historical Commission, Second Avenue North at Broadway, Nashville, Tennessee and Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville.
5. No additions have been made; one exterior alteration, the addition of a ramp for the handicapped, was made in 1981.
Interior alterations: The Council Chamber underwent major alteration in 1974. The oak wainscoting was removed, the ceiling was lowered, lighting fixtures were replaced with recessed lighting, leather-covered doors were removed, original pilasters were replaced by smaller pilasters. Changes were approved by the Metro Council. Courtrooms have been altered at the discretion of the judges whose domains they are.

B. Historical Context

The Davidson County Public Building and Court House replaced a pre-Civil War structure and a nearby city hall which local government had outgrown. Plans for a new building were begun in the late 1920s, delayed by the Depression, and then facilitated by the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. In 1934, a \$400,000 bond issue was approved for the Davidson County government to build the structure, with city government to lease space.

An architectural competition was held in 1935 to select the design. Emmons H. Woolwine of Nashville, working in association with Frederic C. Hiron of New York, won the competition. The cornerstone, containing a box filled with photographs, courthouse records, and current newspapers, was laid in August, 1936. The building was officially opened on the evening of December 8, 1937. Its construction had cost \$1,595,000.

The building's use has remained constant as the seat of local government. In 1963 the city and county governments combined to form the Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

B. Description of Exterior

The courthouse is rectangular in plan, 264 feet wide and 102 feet deep. It contains eight principal floors and a basement. There are also two mezzanines, one between the sixth and seventh floors and one between the seventh and eighth. There are fifteen bays across the front. Construction is steel frame set on concrete piers in solid rock and sheathed with pale beige Indiana limestone. Grey green granite is used as decorative trim at the principal and rear entrances.

The decorative treatment of the rather austere exterior revolves around governmental symbolism. The principal decorative feature is a row of twelve colossal Doric columns rising from the fourth floor through the seventh which link the otherwise quite modern design with traditional American governmental buildings, most obviously Tennessee's exquisite Greek Revival-styled State Capitol.

At the main entrance, three recessed two-story doorways at the center of the principal facade, are three pairs of bronze doors which close flush with the outer wall of the building. On each door is a symbolic figure, representing, in order left to right, courage, loyalty, law, justice, security, and wisdom. During the day when the building is open, the doors swing inward and stand against either side of each doorway recess, making the figures visible to people passing in or out of the building. Above each door is a window with a figure of a lawgiver sandblasted into the glass. These represent King John of England, Moses, and Justinian. There is a similar window above the rear entrance with the figure of blindfolded justice holding scales. In the cornice of the main block, three carved stone figures are a repeating motif. The figures, a snake and the heads of bison and a lioness, represent wisdom, strength, and protection.

Additional decorative work is restrained and more typical of Art Deco designs. Stylized plant forms decorate the bronze spandrel panels between stories on the front and sides of the building. A chevron motif worked into the stone at the top of the penthouse substitutes for a cornice.

B. Description of Interior

Each floor of the courthouse is arranged around a central hall running along the east-west axis of the building but not its entire length. At the center of the building's length, an elevator lobby opens to the north (rear) side off the central hall. Windows in the elevator lobby provide natural light to the hall. The main entrance lobby, a two-story room 30' x 40' in dimension, opens to the south face of the building on the first floor opposite the elevator lobby.

Decorative treatment of the interior is more ornate than the exterior. Red-brown Tennessee marble, highly polished, is used lavishly on the interior; cast bronze and etched glass are used for light fixtures, polished brass for elevator doors, bronze for stair rails. Decorative patterns are worked into the highly polished terrazzo floors. Plaster hallway ceilings are coffered. The main entrance lobby deserves a special mention. The symbolic themes of the exterior carry over into murals on the side walls of the room. The murals, painted by Dean Cornwell, center on four heroic figures representing Industry, Agriculture, Commerce, and Statesmanship (the last, an idealized figure of Andrew Jackson). Behind Industry and Agriculture is a map of Davidson County; behind Commerce and Statesmanship, a map of Nashville (as of 1937). At the center of the ceiling, which is painted with a sunburst effect, is a large bronze and glass chandelier. Its twelve large glass panels are etched with the twelve symbols of the zodiac. The terrazzo floor in the lobby is particularly ornate.

The Courthouse was the first building in Davidson County to be built with central air conditioning.

C. Site

The Courthouse sits in Public Square, the site of Nashville courthouses since the 1780s, at a high point on the bluffs overlooking the Cumberland River. The building faces south-southeast. On the terrace in front of the principal facade are two fountains of grey green granite matching that used for trim on the building. These fountains were designed and executed as an integral part of the project.

Until the early 1970s, the Courthouse was surrounded by solid blocks of nineteenth century commercial and warehouse buildings. These were demolished, and there are now vast parking lots to the south and east of the building.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings

November 1, 1935. Office of the State Architect, James K. Polk Office Building, Nashville.

B. Early Views

Series of photographs made during construction, 1936-37. Office of the Metropolitan Historical Commission, Second Avenue North at Broadway, Nashville.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary Sources

Correspondence and personal papers of John Clark, supervising architect for the project. Copies on file in offices of the State Architect and the Metropolitan Historical Commission.

Interviews with John Clark, 1977, 1981.

Maps: Town of Nashville, from Orange County, North Carolina, records. Original plan, showing Public Square with Public Building, maps nos. 62 and 496. Manuscript Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Minutes of City Council, 1929-1937. Office of the Clerk, Davidson County Courthouse.

State Records of North Carolina, Volume 21, Laws 1777-1788. Reference Division, TSL&A.

2. Secondary Sources

Adams, Rayne. "Master Draftsmen, XXI. Frederic C. Hirons." Pencil Points, July 1927.

"A Noteworthy Competition." Pencil Points, November 1935

"Davidson County Public Building and Court House." Pamphlet, 1937.

Nashville Banner, 1935-1937.

The Tennessean, 1935-1937.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated

County Court records should have additional information about period of construction. Photograph files at TSL&A may have other early photographs.